

Everything i ever wanted

—"I want to recognise your beauty is not just a mask."

Est

The wheels touched down in Tokyo at 6:47 PM local time. I sat frozen in my seat as the plane taxied to the gate, my heart beating so hard I could feel it in my throat. Through the window, I could see it—Japan. Actually, really, genuinely Japan. The airport lights glittering in the early evening darkness, the orderly procession of ground crew, the particular quality of the sky that said you're somewhere new, somewhere different, somewhere you've only dreamed about.

"First time?" asked the woman beside me, a Korean-American tour manager named Sarah who had been assigned to help me acclimate during my first week.

"That obvious?"

"You've had your face pressed against the window for the last twenty minutes." She smiled, not unkindly. "It's cute. Most photographers we work with are too jaded to be impressed by anything."

"I've wanted this my whole life," I admitted. "Since I was a teenager. Since before I even knew it was possible."

"Then let's make it count."

The airport was overwhelming in the best possible way. Everything was so organized. Signs in Japanese and English, clear pathways, staff who bowed politely and pointed me in the right direction before I even had to ask. The luggage carousel delivered my bags with clockwork efficiency, and by the time I made it through customs, I felt like I'd already photographed a hundred moments in my mind.

My actual camera stayed in my bag—I'd learned that much restraint, at least—but my eyes were working overtime. The particular shade of the fluorescent lights. The way people moved with purpose but not aggression. The small details that told you immediately that you weren't in Bangkok anymore.

Outside, the air was different. Cooler than I'd expected for late March, carrying the particular crispness of a city that took seasons seriously. I stood on the curb for a moment, just breathing it in, letting the reality settle into my bones.

I'm here. I'm actually here.

My phone buzzed.

William: Did you land safely?

Est: Just walked out of the airport. William, it's BEAUTIFUL.

William: Send pictures.

Est: I haven't even taken any yet!

William: Then take some. I want to see everything.

I laughed, right there on the curb of Narita International Airport, startling a businessman who was waiting for his own taxi. Then I pulled out my camera—my real camera, the one I'd been carrying for years—and started shooting.

The airport at night. The taxi line. The particular arrangement of signs I'd never seen before. The way the light fell on everything, different from Bangkok, different from anywhere I'd ever been.

I sent William a burst of images, barely edited, just raw captures of the moment.

William: Perfect.

William: I miss you already.

Est: It's been eight hours.

William: That's eight hours too many.

I climbed into the waiting van with Sarah and the rest of the arriving crew, my phone clutched in my hand, my heart full of something I was only beginning to understand.

This was really happening.

And I was ready.

The hotel was in Shinjuku, a district I'd seen in approximately a thousand photographs and films but had never actually experienced. And experiencing was the only word for it.

Even at 8 PM, the streets were alive with light. Neon signs stacked upon neon signs, advertisements towering over pedestrians, the particular chaos of a city that had never learned how to be quiet. Our van crawled through traffic that moved with mysterious efficiency, and I pressed my face against the window like a child, absorbing everything.

"You're going to hurt your neck." Sarah observed.

"Worth it."

"There'll be time to explore. We have three days before the first show."

"Three days isn't enough. Three years wouldn't be enough."

She laughed. "I remember feeling like that. My first tour was in Brazil. I think I slept about four hours total the entire month."

"How do you do it? Get used to it, I mean. The traveling."

"You don't, really. You just learn to pace yourself." She handed me a folder—physical paper, surprisingly analog. "Schedule for the next week. Press conference tomorrow morning, technical rehearsal in the afternoon. The day after that is a free day before the venue load-in. I'd suggest using it to sleep, but somehow I doubt you will."

I looked at the schedule, then back out the window at the city streaming past.

"No," I agreed. "I definitely won't."

My room was on the fourteenth floor, with a view of the city that made me want to weep. I set down my bags without unpacking them—that could wait—and went straight to the window. Shinjuku sprawled beneath me, a sea of lights and movement that seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat. Somewhere out there were temples and shrines and gardens I'd only seen in photographs. Somewhere out there was the Tokyo I'd been dreaming about since I was sixteen years old. But first, I had a call to make. I set up my laptop on the small desk, angling it toward the window so William could see the view. Then I opened the video call app and waited.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hi." I breathed, and suddenly the distance felt very real.

"Hi." His face filled my screen, soft and sleep-rumpled—it was early morning in Bangkok, I realized. He'd set an alarm to catch my call. "You made it."

"I made it."

"Show me."

I turned the laptop toward the window, letting him see what I was seeing. The city lights, the towers, the particular magic of Tokyo at night.

"Oh," William said softly. "Est. It's beautiful."

"I know." I turned the laptop back to face me. "I almost can't believe it's real. That I'm actually here."

"You've earned this. Every part of it."

"I know that too. But it still feels—" I searched for the word. "Impossible. Like at any moment I'm going to wake up and realize I'm still in my apartment in Bangkok, still editing other people's exhibitions, still dreaming about places I'll never see."

"You're not dreaming." William's voice was firm. "This is real. You're real. And you're going to have the adventure of a lifetime."

I felt tears prick at my eyes—happy tears, overwhelmed tears, the particular kind that came when reality exceeded imagination.

"I miss you." I said.

"I miss you too. But I'm also so proud of you that I could burst." He smiled, that particular smile that made everything feel possible. "Now tell me everything. What was the flight like? How's the hotel? What are you going to photograph first?"

I talked for over an hour, words spilling out of me faster than I could organize them. The flight, the airport, the van ride, the city lights. The schedule for the next few days. My plans for the free day. William listened to all of it, asking questions, making comments, being present in a way that made the distance feel smaller.

"It's almost 2 AM here," he said eventually, when my voice had gone hoarse from talking. "You should sleep."

"I know. I just—" I didn't want to hang up. Didn't want to sever this connection, thin as it was, that stretched across oceans and time zones to link us together.

"I'll be here," William said, reading my mind. "Tomorrow night. And the night after. Every night, Est. For as long as you're gone."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I fell asleep with my laptop still open, William's face the last thing I saw before consciousness faded.

The first week was a blur of activity and wonder. The press conference introduced me to the other members of the production team—videographers and sound engineers, lighting designers and stage managers. Everyone was friendly in the particular way of people who spent their lives on the road together, forming temporary families that dissolved and reformed with each new tour.

The technical rehearsal showed me how massive this production actually was. The stage setup alone took twelve hours and involved approximately fifty people, all of them moving with the practiced efficiency of a well-oiled machine. I photographed everything—the empty venue slowly transforming, the equipment being tested, the particular tension and excitement that built as showtime approached. But it was the free day that changed everything.

I woke at 5 AM, too excited to sleep.

The sun was just rising over Tokyo, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink that I'd never seen in Bangkok's pollution-heavy atmosphere. I grabbed my camera and headed out into the city, determined to capture as much as I could in the twelve hours I had.

Shinjuku first. The early morning calm before the chaos, the particular quiet of a city still waking up. I photographed storefronts with their shutters still down, elderly people doing tai chi in a small park, convenience store workers starting their shifts with meticulous precision.

Then Shibuya. The famous crossing, nearly empty at 6 AM, a strange contrast to the images I'd seen of thousands of people flowing across it like water. I photographed the empty intersection, the waiting traffic lights, the screens still cycling through advertisements for an audience that hadn't arrived yet.

Then Harajuku. The fashion district awakening slowly, colorful storefronts beginning to open, young people in elaborate outfits appearing like exotic birds from whatever nests they'd been sleeping in.

Then Asakusa. The temple complex, ancient and modern coexisting in ways that made my photographer's heart sing. I spent three hours there, capturing incense smoke and prayer wheels and the particular quality of light through the temple gates.

By noon, I had over 500 photographs on my memory cards and a newfound understanding of what I'd been missing my entire life.

This was what I was meant to do. This was who I was meant to be.

I found a small ramen shop—the kind with no English menu and a ticket machine at the entrance—and figured out how to order through a combination of pointing and hopeful gestures. The ramen was the best thing I'd ever tasted, rich and complex and utterly unlike anything I'd had in Thailand.

I photographed that too.

Est: [Image] [Image] [Image] [Image]

Est: I've been awake for 9 hours and I've already taken 500 photos.

William: They're incredible.

Est: I haven't even gotten to the good ones yet.

William: Est, these ARE good ones.

Est: You have to say that.

William: I have to say nothing. I'm an artist with standards. These photos are extraordinary.

I smiled at my phone, sitting in the ramen shop with an empty bowl in front of me and a heart full of warmth.

Est: The ramen was incredible too. I'll send you pictures.

William: Please do. I want to see everything you eat.

Est: That's a strange thing to want.

William: It's not strange. It's you. I want to experience this with you, even from far away.

I sent him pictures of the ramen. Then pictures of the temple. Then pictures of the crossing, still relatively quiet but starting to fill with the day's first wave of tourists.

He responded to each one with genuine attention—questions about the composition, observations about the light, comments that showed he was really looking, really seeing what I'd captured. This was what love felt like, I realized. Not just the missing, but the sharing. The desire to give someone else access to your experiences, to let them into your world even when that world was on the other side of the planet.

The first concert was in the Tokyo Dome. I'd seen videos of concerts before—had even photographed a few small shows in Bangkok—but nothing could have prepared me for the scale of this. 55,000 seats, all of them filled with fans waving lightsticks that created a sea of coordinated color. The sound system was so powerful I could feel the bass in my chest, and the lighting design turned the entire venue into a living canvas.

My job was to capture it all. Every moment. Every angle. I moved through the venue like a ghost, my camera raised, my finger never leaving the shutter button. The stage from the front. The crowd from above. The particular expression on a fan's face as their favorite song began. The sweat on a performer's brow as they hit the high note.

It was the most intense three hours of my professional life. And I loved every second of it.

Est: I just finished my first show.

William: How was it?

Est: I can't feel my arms. I've been holding my camera up for three hours straight.

William: That sounds exhausting.

Est: It was amazing. William, it was AMAZING. The energy, the lights, the SOUND. I've never experienced anything like it.

Est: I took almost 2000 photos.

William: 2000???

Est: Most of them will be garbage. That's how it works. But somewhere in there are the ones that matter.

William: I can't wait to see them.

Est: I'll send you my favorites. After I sleep for approximately 47 hours.

William: Sleep well. I'm proud of you.

Est: I'm proud of me too.

That night, I fell asleep with my camera on the pillow beside me, my body exhausted and my soul fuller than it had ever been.

By the end of the second week, I'd found my rhythm. The days had a structure now—a pattern I could rely on even as the locations changed. Morning prep work: reviewing the previous day's shots, selecting the best ones, editing the images that needed to be delivered to the management team. Afternoon setup: arriving at the venue, scouting the best positions, testing my equipment. Evening show: three hours of focused, intense work that left me wrung out and exhilarated. And every night, without fail: the call with William.

"Tell me about today," he said, his face warm on my screen. It was Day 15 of the tour, and we were still in Japan—our last night in Tokyo before moving on to Osaka.

"Today I photographed the soundcheck," I said, curled up in my hotel bed with the laptop propped on pillows. "They let me get really close to the stage. I got this shot of one of the members—adjusting his in-ear monitor, and the light was hitting him at this perfect angle—"

"Show me."

I turned the laptop toward my desk, where I had the photo pulled up on my editing monitor.

"Oh," William said softly. "Est. That's stunning."

"I know." I couldn't help the pride in my voice. "It's one of the best things I've ever

shot."

"It belongs in a gallery."

"It belongs in a tour photobook. Which is where it's going."

"Can I have a copy? When the tour is over?"

"You can have copies of everything. Every photo I take, if you want them."

"I want them all." His voice was warm. "I want to see your whole journey. Every step of it."

I turned the laptop back to face me, and we just looked at each other for a moment—the particular intimacy of being seen, even through a screen.

"I miss you." I said.

"I miss you too. But I'm also so happy for you. This—what you're doing—it's everything you were meant to be."

"Is it strange? Being happy and missing someone at the same time?"

"No. That's just love. Love isn't about needing someone to be happy. It's about wanting to share your happiness with them." He smiled. "And you're sharing. Every night. I feel like I'm on this tour with you."

"You are. Every photo I take, I think about what you'll see when you look at it. Every city I visit, I imagine what it would be like to show you in person."

"Then I'm there. In the only way that matters right now."

The group chat was just as active.

CHAOS SQUAD (Est, Tui, Lego, Hong, Nut)

Est: [Image] [Image] [Image]

Est: Osaka! We just arrived!

Lego: AHHHH IT'S SO PRETTY

Lego: Is that Osaka Castle???

Est: It's the view from our hotel! We're near the castle district!

Hong: That's actually really beautiful. The light quality is interesting.

Tui: Hong, stop being a photography critic. Just say it's nice.



Hong: It's nice AND the light quality is interesting. I can do both.

Est: How's everyone doing there? I miss you guys.

Lego: We miss you too!! P'Tui and I went on a date yesterday. I'll send pictures!

Lego: [Image] [Image]

The photos showed Lego and Tui at what appeared to be a cat café. Lego was buried in cats—literally, three of them draped across his lap and shoulders—while Tui sat nearby, trying very hard to look dignified despite the orange tabby that had claimed his head as a throne.

Est: This is the best thing I've seen all day.

Est: And I saw 55,000 people wave lightsticks in perfect unison.

Tui: The cat would not move. It was there for 40 minutes.

Lego: He named it!

Tui: I did not name it.

Lego: He called it "Supreme Commander Orange Face"

Tui: THAT WAS A DESCRIPTION NOT A NAME

Hong: Sure, P'Tui.

Est: I love you all so much.

Nut: We love you too! Now stop texting and go photograph things!

Est: Yes sir!

Osaka was different from Tokyo. Not better or worse—just different. Where Tokyo was sleek and modern and slightly intimidating in its efficiency, Osaka was warmer. More casual. The people laughed louder, spoke more directly, seemed to take less seriously the rules that Tokyo treated as sacred.

I loved it immediately.

My free day in Osaka started at Dotonbori, the famous entertainment district with its massive neon signs and canal views. I photographed the running man sign, the giant crab that moved its legs, the endless parade of food stalls offering things I'd never tried before. I ate takoyaki—octopus balls—from a street vendor and burned my mouth because I was too impatient to let them cool. I photographed the vendors making them, the batter pouring into round molds, the deft wrist movements that

turned them into perfect spheres.

Then I walked to Shinsekai, the old neighborhood with the famous tower and the streets full of kushikatsu shops. The contrast from Dotonbori was striking—grittier, older, more lived-in. I photographed elderly men playing shogi on the street, shop owners smoking outside their establishments, the particular quality of light that came through the narrow alleyways.

I found a tiny camera shop tucked between two restaurants and spent an hour inside, talking to the owner in broken English and enthusiastic gestures. He showed me vintage lenses I'd only seen in photographs, rare cameras that collectors would kill for, accessories that made my hands shake with desire.

I bought three new memory cards—more than I needed, but the prices were good and I was already filling them faster than I'd expected. I also bought a lens filter I'd been wanting for years, available here for half what it cost in Bangkok.

Est: [Image]

William: What am I looking at?

Est: MY NEW FILTER

Est: IT'S BEAUTIFUL

Est: I'VE WANTED THIS FOR THREE YEARS

William: I have no idea what a filter does but I'm happy you're happy.

Est: It changes how the light enters the lens! This one creates a soft diffusion effect that's perfect for certain kinds of portraiture!

William: I understood approximately 30% of that.

Est: That's okay. Just know that I'm very excited.

William: I can tell. You've sent me seventeen exclamation points in the last five minutes.

Est: EIGHTEEN!!!!!!

William: And now twenty-four.

The concerts in Osaka were different too—the crowds louder, more demonstrative, feeding off the performers' energy in ways that made the Tokyo shows seem almost subdued in comparison. I caught myself grinning behind my camera, which was something I'd never done at a shoot before. The joy was infectious. The whole arena seemed to pulse with it, and I was right there in the middle, capturing it all.

My favorite shot from Osaka was unplanned. I was positioned near the stage, waiting for a particular moment in the choreography, when one of the members—made eye contact with a fan in the front row and smiled. Not the performance smile, but something genuine and surprised, like he'd seen a friend he wasn't expecting.

I caught that moment. The connection between performer and fan, authentic and unguarded.

When I showed it to the tour manager later, she actually gasped.

"This is going in the photobook," she said immediately. "Front section. Maybe the cover."

I tried to play it cool. "Thanks. I got lucky with the timing."

"Luck is what you call it when preparation meets opportunity. You were prepared. You were in the right place. That's not luck—that's skill."

I didn't tell William about the potential cover placement. Not yet. I wanted to wait until it was confirmed, until I could tell him something definite. But I carried the possibility with me like a secret gift, warming me from the inside.

The transition from Japan to Korea felt like entering a slightly different dimension. Similar but different. The alphabet changed overnight—Japanese characters giving way to the distinctive circles and lines of Hangul. The food shifted too, from Japanese precision to Korean abundance, dishes arriving with a dozen small sides that I couldn't identify but happily devoured. Seoul was massive. Even bigger than Tokyo, somehow, sprawling across mountains and rivers in ways that made photography a challenge and a delight.

"Tell me everything." William said on our first call from Seoul. It was Day 22 of the tour, and I'd been in the country for approximately eight hours.

"I don't even know where to start. The city is incredible. Completely different from Japan but also somehow similar? The same kind of energy but expressed differently."

"Different how?"

"Japan felt like—like everything was precisely designed. Every detail considered. Korea feels more organic somehow. More spontaneous. The neighborhoods I walked through today had this chaotic energy, all these shops and restaurants piled on top of each other without any apparent plan."

"That sounds overwhelming."

"It is. In the best way." I shifted my laptop, trying to find a better angle. "I photographed so many things today. Street food and palaces and this one old man who was doing calligraphy on the street. He let me watch him work for almost an hour."

"Did you take pictures of him?"

"About 200." I laughed at myself. "I'm developing a problem. My memory cards are going to give up on me at this rate."

"I think you developed that problem years ago. This is just the first time you've had unlimited subjects."

"That's fair."

We talked for another hour, William telling me about his day—therapy session, renovation progress, dinner with Lego and Tui. I told him about the flight, the hotel, my plans for the next few days. It was domestic, somehow. Comfortable. Like we'd been doing this for years instead of weeks.

"I love you." I said, when we finally had to say goodbye.

"I love you too. Send me pictures tomorrow."

"I always do."

"I know. That's why I remind you. So you know I'm always waiting for them."

By Week 4, I'd become part of something. The tour crew had absorbed me the way water absorbs a stone—gradually, inevitably, until I couldn't remember what it felt like to be separate. We ate meals together, traded complaints about hotel rooms, shared the particular exhaustion of people who were doing impossible things on impossible schedules.

My closest friend was Min-young, a Korean videographer who had been on three previous tours and had approximately a thousand stories to tell about each of them.

"You're good," she said one night, reviewing my shots from the day's show. "Really good. The management team is impressed."

"They are?"

"Don't act surprised. You know you're good."

"I know I'm—competent. Good feels like a big word."

"It's the right word." She handed me back my camera. "Your eye is different from

the other photographers they've hired. You see moments other people miss."

"I just pay attention."

"That's exactly what I mean. Paying attention is the whole job. Most people don't do it."

I thought about that later, lying in my hotel bed, watching the Seoul skyline through my window. Paying attention. That's what Est had taught me—what William had reminded me—what I'd been learning my whole life without realizing it.

The camera was just a tool. The real art was in the seeing.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: [Image] [Image] [Image]

Lego: HAIR UPDATE!!!

The photos showed Lego at a salon, his hair freshly trimmed and styled, a few subtle highlights adding dimension to his dark locks. Hong was visible in the background of one photo, looking deeply skeptical of whatever the stylist was suggesting for him.

Est: You look GORGEOUS

Lego: Thank you!!! Hong is getting his touched up too but he's being difficult about the color

Hong: I'm not being difficult. I'm being precise. There's a difference.

Tui: He made the stylist show him seventeen different silver samples.

Hong: Sixteen. And they were all different.

Est: I can't believe I'm missing this. Take more photos!

Lego: [Image]

Hong, in a salon chair, his silver hair covered in foils, his expression suggesting he was actively plotting someone's demise.

Est: SAVE. SAVED FOREVER. THIS IS MY NEW SCREENSAVER.

Hong: I will destroy you.

Est: You look precious.

Hong: I look like a baked potato.

Tui: A very handsome baked potato.

Hong: I hate all of you.

The Korean concerts were a different experience entirely. The fans here were more organized—fan chants coordinated to perfection, lightstick colors changing in unison like a living organism. The energy was electric in a way that felt almost overwhelming, and I found myself photographing the crowd almost as much as the performers.

I caught one shot that would haunt me for months afterward: a fan in the second row, tears streaming down her face, hands pressed to her mouth, watching her favorite member perform a solo. The devotion on her face was so raw, so genuine, that I had to look away after I took the photo.

This was what it meant to matter to people. To create something that touched them so deeply they couldn't contain their emotions. I wanted to create things that mattered like that.

Week 5 brought a revelation: I needed to buy gifts. Not needed, exactly—wanted. Desperately. Every shop I passed seemed to contain something perfect for someone I loved, and my suitcase was rapidly filling with acquisitions.

For Lego, I found plush keychains at almost every stop—cute cartoon characters, city mascots, tiny representations of famous landmarks. He'd mentioned offhandedly once that he collected them, that they hung from his bag like a mobile, and I'd filed that information away for exactly this purpose.

For Hong and Tui, I haunted the band merchandise shops. T-shirts from Japanese artists they'd mentioned admiring. Vinyl records from Korean underground scenes. A particularly rare CD that Tui had been searching for for years, found in a tiny Seoul record shop that I'd stumbled into by accident.

For Nut, I collected books—photography collections, art theory, the kind of intellectual material he devoured during rare moments of downtime.

And for William—For William, I collected everything. Pressed flowers from the gardens I visited. Postcards from every city, hand-written with messages I knew he'd save. Small art prints that reminded me of his work. A beautiful ceramic cup from a Kyoto craftsman that I imagined him drinking his morning coffee from.

"You're going to need an extra suitcase." Min-young observed, watching me add

another wrapped package to my growing pile.

"I know. I've already bought one."

"For gifts?"

"For people who matter."

She smiled, something knowing in her expression. "The boyfriend?"

"And others. But yes. Mostly the boyfriend."

"He must be something special."

"He is." I looked at the pile of gifts, thinking about the people waiting for me back home. "He really is."

Est: I bought you something today.

William: You've bought me something every day for five weeks.

Est: This one is special.

William: They're all special. You've sent me photos of each one like they're your children.

Est: They ARE my children. My gift children.

William: You're ridiculous and I love you.

Est: I know. That's why I keep buying you things.

William: You don't have to buy me things.

Est: I know. But I walk past a shop and I see something and I think "William would love that" and then it's in my bag before I can stop myself.

William: I'm not complaining.

Est: You should see my suitcase. It's mostly gifts at this point. I've started wearing the same three outfits in rotation because everything else is presents.

William: I love you.

Est: I love you too. Even more than shopping.

William: That's the most romantic thing you've ever said to me.

April arrived, and with it came news from home that I was missing something

important.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: SONGKRAN PLANS!!!

Lego: We're doing the whole thing this year! Water fights, temple visits, family stuff!

Lego: P'Est, I'm so sad you're not here for it

Est: Me too! But I want to see EVERYTHING. Take a million photos.

Tui: We're doing Khao San Road on the main day. Full chaos.

Hong: I've been informed that my attendance is mandatory.

Nut: Same.

Lego: It's going to be SO FUN! P'Will, are you coming???

William: I don't think Khao San Road is advisable for me. Too many people, too much stimulation.

Lego: We could do something smaller? Just the group?

William: Actually... Tui mentioned karaoke at the studio. After the street celebration dies down.

Lego: KARAOKE???? P'WILL AT KARAOKE????

William: Don't make it a thing.

Lego: IT'S DEFINITELY A THING

I watched the group chat explode with excitement, feeling a complicated mix of happiness and wistfulness. I was missing Songkran—one of my favorite holidays, the celebration of water and renewal that marked the Thai New Year. But I was also here, in Korea, living a dream I'd carried for years. Both things were true. Both things mattered.

William: You're missing Songkran.

Est: I know. It's okay.

William: Is it? You love Songkran.

Est: I do. But I also love this. What I'm doing here. And Songkran will happen again next year. This tour won't.

William: Still. I'm sorry you're missing it.



Est: Don't be. You're going to karaoke with everyone. That's almost better.

William: I'm terrified, honestly.

Est: Of karaoke?

William: Of public spaces. Even with people I trust. But Lego was so excited when Tui suggested it, and I want to try. Want to prove I can.

Est: You're amazing. You know that, right?

William: I'm learning.

Est: Take videos? I want to see you sing.

William: That seems like a bad idea.

Est: It seems like the BEST idea.

William: Fine. But only if you send me photos of whatever you're doing to celebrate.

Est: Deal.

Songkran in Seoul was nothing like Songkran in Bangkok. There was no water festival, no street parties, no chaos of tourists and locals alike drenching each other in the April heat. Instead, the Korean spring unfolded quietly around me—cherry blossoms blooming, the air warming, a different kind of renewal taking place.

I photographed it all. The pink blossoms against blue sky. The couples walking hand in hand through the parks. The particular quality of light that came with the turning of the season. And I thought about home. About William at karaoke, trying something new, pushing against his boundaries. About Lego and Tui in the water fights, probably drenched and laughing. About Hong pretending to be annoyed while secretly having the time of his life. I was here. They were there. And somehow, impossibly, we were still connected.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: [Video]

The video was shaky, clearly filmed on a phone in a dark room. But I could make out the scene: the back room of Ink & Ashes, transformed with a karaoke machine and disco lights. Tui was behind a small bar setup, making drinks. Hong was scrolling through the song list with intense focus. And William—

William was singing.

He was terrible. Completely, hilariously terrible, his voice cracking on the high notes, his rhythm off by approximately half a beat. But he was doing it. Standing in front of the screen, microphone in hand, singing some Thai pop ballad that I recognized from our teenage years. And he was smiling.

Est: I'M CRYING

Est: THIS IS THE BEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN

Est: WHO IS THIS PERSON AND WHAT HAS HE DONE WITH MY BOYFRIEND

William: Please delete this.

Est: NEVER

William: I'm going to kill Lego.

Lego: Worth it!!!

Est: You look so HAPPY

Est: William, you look so happy.

There was a pause before his response came.

William: I am happy. I'm learning to be.

Est: That's all I've ever wanted for you.

William: I know. That's why I'm trying.

The next day, Lego sent more photos. Songkran chaos—Lego drenched and laughing, Tui trying to protect his phone while also throwing water at someone off-camera. Hong looking like a drowned cat but also, somehow, beautiful. Nut managing to stay mostly dry, probably through some kind of professional magic.

Temple visits—the whole group at a small shrine, dressed nicely despite the water festival, paying respects for the new year. Even William was in one photo, standing slightly apart from the group but unmistakably present.

And then the karaoke aftermath—everyone sprawled across the studio furniture, looking exhausted and happy and connected in ways I could feel even through the screen.

Est: You went to the temple too?

William: Lego insisted. Said it was important for the new year.

Est: How was it?

William: Crowded. Overwhelming. But also... good? It felt right to be there. To participate in something.

Est: I'm so proud of you. You have no idea.

William: I think I'm starting to.

Week 6 brought a new country. Taiwan felt like coming home to a place I'd never been. The language was different—Mandarin instead of Japanese or Korean—but there was something familiar in the energy, something that reminded me of Bangkok in ways I couldn't quite articulate.

Maybe it was the street food. Night markets sprawling for blocks, vendors selling things I'd never tried and things that felt like old friends. Bubble tea that put Bangkok's versions to shame. Fried chicken that made me want to weep.

Maybe it was the people. Friendly in an easy, uncomplicated way, willing to help despite the language barrier, laughing at my terrible attempts at Mandarin. Or maybe it was just the cumulative effect of weeks on the road, weeks of opening myself to new experiences, weeks of becoming someone slightly different than the person who had boarded that first plane.

"You seem different." William observed on our nightly call. It was Day 42 of the tour, and I was sitting on my hotel bed in Taipei, watching the city lights through the window.

"Different how?"

"Calmer, maybe. More—settled? Like you've found something you were looking for."

"I have." I considered how to explain it. "Being here, doing this work, seeing these places—it's confirmed something I always suspected but wasn't sure about. That I'm good at this. That I belong here. That the dreams I've been carrying since I was a teenager weren't just fantasies."

"They were never fantasies."

"They felt like fantasies. When I was working corporate jobs and editing other people's exhibitions and telling myself that someday, maybe, if I was lucky—" I stopped, emotion welling up unexpectedly. "This isn't someday anymore, William. This is now. This is real."

"I know." His voice was soft. "I've been watching you become real for weeks. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"More beautiful than your paintings?"

"Much more beautiful than my paintings." He smiled. "You're my favorite work of art, Est. You always have been."

Taiwan brought new challenges—different venues, different logistics, different light conditions to adapt to. But by now I knew what I was doing. Knew how to read a room, knew how to anticipate moments, knew how to be in the right place at the right time. My photos from the Taiwan shows were some of my best. I captured things I hadn't been able to catch before—subtler emotions, smaller moments, the particular intimacy that came from understanding my subjects.

"These are incredible," Min-young said, reviewing the day's shots. "You're getting better. I didn't think that was possible."

"I'm just getting comfortable. Learning the rhythms."

"Most photographers plateau after the first few weeks. You're still improving. That's rare."

I thought about that later. About growth. About the way doing something you love pushes you to become more than you were.

This was what my life could be. Not just this tour, but this kind of existence—traveling, photographing, constantly challenging myself to see more and capture better. And somehow, impossibly, I could have this AND William. This AND my friends. This AND everything else that mattered.

The two weren't in opposition. They were in harmony.

Week 7 brought unexpected news from home.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: P'EST P'EST P'EST

Lego: [Image] [Image] [Image]

Lego: YOUR BILLBOARD IS UP!!!

The photos showed a massive LED screen in central Bangkok—one of the famous advertising displays that dominated the Siam intersection. And on it, larger than life, was an image I recognized.

My image.

The makeup campaign I'd shot months ago, before the tour, before everything. The

model's face, perfectly lit, the makeup brand's logo subtle but unmissable. My photograph, now thirty feet tall, visible to thousands of people every day.

Est: WHAT

Est: THAT'S MINE???

Lego: YES!!! P'Will and I came to see it!!!

Lego: [Image]

The photo showed William standing in front of the billboard, looking up at it with an expression I couldn't quite read. Pride, maybe. Wonder.

William: I wanted to be here when you found out. Nut told us it was going up today.

Est: You're AT the billboard???

William: Lego insisted we come. He wanted to take pictures.

Lego: For posterity!!!

Lego: YOUR PHOTO in GIANT

I stared at my phone, the reality of it slowly sinking in. My work, on a billboard, in the heart of Bangkok. My vision, visible to thousands—maybe millions—of people. All those years of dreaming. All those years of wondering if I'd ever amount to anything, if my father was right when he said I'd never succeed, if I was wasting my life chasing something impossible.

This was my answer.

This was my proof.

Est: I don't know what to say.

William: You don't have to say anything. You just have to know: I'm so proud of you. We all are.

Hong: It's a good photo. The composition is elegant.

Tui: Hong's been staring at it for ten minutes.

Hong: I have NOT

Tui: He definitely has.

Nut: For the record, the client is thrilled. They want to talk about future campaigns when you're back.

Est: Future campaigns???

Nut: You're building a reputation. People notice. I told you this would happen.

That night, I cried. Not sad tears—overwhelmed tears. Happy tears. The particular kind that came when reality exceeded imagination, when dreams you'd carried for years suddenly became concrete and undeniable.

My phone buzzed with a video call request. William.

I answered with wet cheeks and red eyes, not bothering to hide the evidence.

"Hey," he said softly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm more than okay." I wiped my face with the back of my hand. "I'm—I don't have words. Seeing that billboard, knowing my work is out there, that people are seeing it —"

"It's what you deserve. What you've always deserved."

"It doesn't feel real. Any of it. The tour, the billboard, you—" I laughed helplessly. "A year ago, I was barely surviving. Working a job I hated, feeling like a failure, convinced I'd never amount to anything. And now—"

"And now you're living your dream. All of them."

"Yeah." I took a shaky breath. "Yeah, I am."

"I want you to remember this feeling," William said. "When you're tired, when the tour is hard, when you miss home and wonder if it was worth it—remember this. Remember that you did it. That you proved them wrong."

"Proved who wrong?"

"Everyone who ever doubted you. Including yourself."

I thought about my father. About the day he'd kicked me out, the words he'd hurled at me, the conviction in his voice that I was worthless, that I'd never amount to anything. For years, I'd carried those words like stones in my pockets, weighing me down, making it hard to believe in any version of myself. But here was the evidence. Here was the proof.

I was worthy. I was capable. I was exactly who I'd always hoped I could become.

"I love you." I said.

"I love you too. Now go to sleep. You have a show tomorrow."

"I know." I smiled at him through the screen. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Same time every day. For as long as you're gone."

"And after?"

"After, we figure out what comes next. Together."

Week 8 brought a different kind of milestone. I'd been doing my therapy sessions online—video calls with Dr. Siriporn scheduled around the tour demands—and they'd been helpful in ways I hadn't expected. Talking through the overwhelm, processing the emotions, learning to manage the particular challenges of living a dream while missing everything I'd left behind. But this session was different.

"I want to talk about my father." I said.

Dr. Siriporn's expression remained neutral, though I thought I saw a flicker of something—approval, maybe—in her eyes.

"What brought this up?"

"The billboard. My work being seen by thousands of people. The success I'm having on this tour." I took a breath. "Everything he said would never happen is happening. And I realized—I've been carrying his words with me for years. Letting them define me. But they were wrong. He was wrong."

"How does it feel to say that?"

"Terrifying. And also—freeing?" I searched for the right way to explain it. "For so long, I believed him. Believed that I was worthless, that I'd never succeed, that being who I am was somehow broken or wrong. But here I am. Doing the things he said I couldn't. Being the person he said I shouldn't."

"And what does that tell you about his words?"

"That they were never about me. They were about him—his fears, his limitations, his inability to accept anything different from what he expected." I felt tears prick at my eyes, but I didn't try to stop them. "I'm not what he said I was. I never was."

"No. You weren't." Dr. Siriporn's voice was gentle. "What do you want to do with this realization?"

"Let it go. Not the memory—I don't think I can forget what happened. But the power. The way his words have been living in my head, telling me I'm not enough. I want to evict them. Make room for something else."

"What would you put in their place?"

I thought about it. About the billboard. About the tour. About William and Lego and

all the people who loved me exactly as I was.

"Truth," I said finally. "I'd put truth in their place. The truth that I'm talented. That I'm worthy. That I deserve the good things that are happening to me."

"Do you believe that? Right now, in this moment?"

I looked at my laptop screen—at my own face reflected in the video call, at the person I was becoming.

"Yes," I said. "I believe it."

I didn't tell William everything about the session—some things were private, between me and my therapist—but I told him the important part.

"I'm letting go of my father's voice," I said on our nightly call. "Not forgetting what happened, but stopping letting it define me."

"That's huge, Est. That's—" He stopped, emotional in a way I rarely saw him. "I'm so proud of you."

"I'm proud of me too." I smiled at him through the screen. "It's been a long time coming. But I think I'm finally ready to believe in myself. All the way."

"You should. You're extraordinary."

"So are you."

"I'm trying to be." He looked at me with an expression that made my heart ache. "We're both learning, aren't we? Both becoming someone new."

"Yeah. But becoming together. Even from far away."

"Especially from far away."

Week 8 brought the Philippines. Manila was chaos in the most beautiful way—a city that refused to be contained, that sprawled and shouted and embraced everything with open arms. The shows here were different again, the fans passionate in ways that felt almost overwhelming, the energy electric and untamed.

I photographed jeepneys and street vendors, colonial architecture and modern skyscrapers, the particular way the tropical light fell through the humidity. Everything was different here—the colors more saturated, the sounds more layered, the whole experience more intense than anything I'd encountered before.

Est: [Image] [Image] [Image]



William: These are stunning.

Est: The light here is incredible. I've never seen anything like it.

William: The composition too. That shot of the church with the sunset behind it—

Est: I waited two hours for that shot. Just sat on a bench and watched the light change until it was perfect.

William: That's dedication.

Est: That's photography. Sometimes you have to wait for the world to arrange itself the way you need it.

William: That's beautiful.

Est: You're beautiful.

William: You're corny.

Est: You love it.

William: I really do.

The Philippine shows were my favorite so far. Something about the energy—the way the fans responded, the way the performers fed off that response—created moments I'd been trying to capture for weeks. I found myself moving differently through the venue, anticipating beats before they happened, knowing instinctively where to be and when.

My best shot from Manila was accidental. One of the members—had stopped mid-song to help a fan who was crying in the front row. Just knelt down, right there on stage, and held her hand for a moment while the song continued around them. The fan's face was transformed—shock giving way to overwhelming emotion—and I captured the exact moment when their eyes met. It was intimate. Private. The kind of thing you weren't supposed to photograph because it felt like intruding. But it was also art. Real, raw, human art.

Est: [Image]

William: Est.

Est: I know.

William: This is—I don't have words.

Est: Me neither. I just knew I had to capture it.

William: This belongs in a gallery. Not a tour photobook. An actual gallery.

Est: Maybe someday.

William: Not maybe. Definitely. When you come home, we're going to talk about this. About showing your work properly.

Est: You think people would want to see it?

William: I know they would. Your eye is extraordinary, Est. You see things no one else sees. You capture moments that no one else even notices.

Est: That's what you do too. With your paintings.

William: Then we understand each other.

Day 56. The halfway point. I celebrated by doing something I'd been avoiding: looking back through all the photos I'd taken since the tour began. There were thousands of them. Tens of thousands, actually, when I counted everything—the professional shots and the personal ones, the cities and the concerts and the countless small moments in between.

I organized them by location, then by date, then by theme. Watched the tour unfold through my own lens, seeing the progression I'd been too close to notice while it was happening.

The early photos were good. Technically proficient, compositionally sound. But something had changed over the weeks. The later images had something the earlier ones lacked—a looseness, maybe. A willingness to take risks. A trust in my own instincts that hadn't been there at the beginning.

I was getting better. Actually, genuinely better.

Est: I just looked through all my photos from the tour so far.

William: That must have taken hours.

Est: It did. But it was worth it. I can see my progress now. How much I've grown.

William: Tell me about it.

Est: The early stuff—Japan, the first week—it's good, but it's safe. I was still finding my footing, still trying to prove I belonged. But somewhere along the way I stopped worrying about that and just... started seeing. Really seeing.

William: When do you think that shifted?

Est: I don't know. Gradually, I think. There wasn't one moment. Just a slow accumulation of confidence. Of believing that my vision mattered.

William: That's beautiful.

Est: It is, actually. It's really beautiful. I came here hoping to prove myself, and somewhere along the way I stopped needing to. I just... became.

William: Became what?

Est: The photographer I always knew I could be. The person I always hoped I'd find a way to become.

William: You were always that person. You just hadn't met him yet.

That night, I stayed up late, selecting my favorite images from each country. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines. Eight weeks of work, distilled into approximately fifty photographs.

I put them in an album on my laptop and labeled it: Everything I Ever Wanted.

Then I sent the whole thing to William.

Est: These are my favorites. One for every day of the tour so far.

William: I'm going to look at every single one.

Est: I know you are.

William: And I'm going to tell you what I see in each of them.

Est: You don't have to—

William: I want to. I want to understand what you see when you look at the world. I want to learn your language.

Est: Photography isn't really a language.

William: Everything's a language. Painting is a language. Photography is a language. Love is a language. You just have to be willing to learn.

Est: I love you.

William: I love you too. Now go to sleep. I'll have notes for you tomorrow.

I fell asleep smiling, thinking about William looking through my photos, thinking about the connection that stretched across oceans and time zones.

Six weeks down. Six weeks to go.

And I was already dreaming about what would come next.

The final stops of the first two months: Singapore and Malaysia.

Singapore was clean and orderly, a city-state that had optimized itself into something almost surreal. The architecture was stunning—massive trees made of steel and light, buildings that seemed to defy physics, the constant interplay of nature and technology. Malaysia was warmer, more familiar, reminding me of home in ways that made me homesick and comforted at the same time. The street food was incredible—laksa and nasi lemak and satay that rivaled anything I'd had in Bangkok. The shows were smaller but more intimate, the fans passionate in a quieter, more devoted way.

CHAOS SQUAD

Est: [Image] [Image] [Image]

Est: Singapore! Malaysia! I'm running out of memory cards!

Lego: These are GORGEOUS

Lego: The one with the Marina Bay Sands

Hong: The composition is good but the saturation seems high.

Tui: Hong.

Hong: What? I'm being constructive!

Est: Hong is right. I was experimenting with color profiles. Still figuring out what works.

Hong: See? He appreciates feedback.

Tui: He's being polite because he's nicer than you.

Hong: I'm plenty nice.

Lego: P'Est, we miss you so much! How much longer?

Est: Four more weeks. I'll be home before you know it.

William: We're counting the days.

Est: Me too. Every single one.

The Malaysia shows were my last ones for a few weeks—a brief break in the schedule before the tour resumed for its final leg. I spent the time wandering Kuala Lumpur, photographing everything, trying to absorb as much as I could before I had to return to work mode.

I found a small gift shop that specialized in handmade crafts and bought something for everyone—fabric for Lego who was learning to sew, art prints for Hong's collection, vintage music paraphernalia for Tui, rare photography books for Nut. And for William, I found something special: a set of hand-painted ceramic tiles, each one depicting a different flower from the region. They'd look perfect in the house he was renovating, in the garden Lego was creating.

Est: I found something for you today. But I'm not telling you what it is.

William: Why not?

Est: Because the surprise is half the fun. You'll see it when I get home.

William: That's in four weeks!

Est: I know. Four very long weeks of wondering.

William: You're cruel.

Est: I'm romantic. There's a difference.

William: The line between those things is very thin.

Est: That's what makes it interesting.

Day 60. Two months completed.

I sat on my hotel balcony in Kuala Lumpur, watching the sunset paint the city in shades of gold and orange, and thought about everything that had happened since I'd left Bangkok.

I'd photographed concerts in seven cities across five countries. I'd captured moments that would be seen by millions of people. I'd grown as an artist in ways I couldn't have imagined before this started. But more than that—I'd grown as a person.

The voice in my head that had always told me I wasn't enough, that I'd never succeed, that I was broken or wrong—it was quieter now. Still there, sometimes, in

the moments before sleep or the seconds after waking. But quieter. Less powerful. And in its place, something new was growing. Confidence, maybe. Or just the simple, profound knowledge that I was doing what I was meant to do.

Est: Day 60. Two months down.

William: How do you feel?

Est: Complete. Somehow. Like I've finally become the person I was always supposed to be.

William: You've always been that person. The tour just gave you a chance to see it.

Est: Maybe. But I needed to see it. Needed to prove it to myself. All those years of doubting—they're fading now. Being replaced by something better.

William: I'm so happy for you. So proud.

Est: I'm happy too. And excited. For the rest of the tour, for coming home, for everything that comes next.

William: What comes next?

Est: Us. The house. Our lives. All the things we're going to build together.

William: I can't wait.

Est: Neither can I. Four more weeks, William. Then I'm coming home to you.

William: I'll be ready. I'll have everything ready.

Est: The house?

William: The house. The garden. The life. All of it.

Est: That sounds perfect.

William: It will be. Because you'll be in it.

I ended the call and looked out at the Malaysian night, stars visible above the city lights.

Four more weeks of adventure. Four more weeks of photography and discovery and becoming. And then home. To William. To the life waiting for me.

I'd never been so excited for anything in my entire existence.

Everything I ever wanted, I thought. This is what it feels like.

And I smiled at the stars, at the future, at the infinite possibility stretching out

before me.

The last month passed in the blink of an eye. One moment I was counting the days—thirty of them, stretching ahead like a promise—and the next I was standing in the wings of our final venue, watching the last concert unfold, my camera capturing moments I knew I would remember forever. It wasn't that time moved faster in the final weeks. It was that I had learned to exist fully within each moment, to stop counting and start living, to let the experience wash over me without constantly measuring how much was left. And now it was ending.

The final show was in Seoul, back where the Korean leg of the tour had begun. There was something poetic about that—the circular nature of it, the way we'd traced a path through five countries only to return to where we'd started. The venue was massive, 65,000 seats filled with fans who had waited months for this night, and the energy was unlike anything I'd experienced before.

I moved through the space like I had a hundred times before—finding angles, anticipating moments, capturing the particular magic that happened when performers and audience became one living, breathing organism. But underneath the professional focus, something else was building.

This was the last time.

The last concert. The last backstage rush. The last time I would stand in this particular kind of chaos, surrounded by people who had become something like family over the past three months. And tomorrow—

Tomorrow, I would go home.

The after-party was smaller than I expected. Just the core crew—the photographers and videographers, the managers and assistants who had kept everything running. We'd gathered in a private room at a restaurant near the venue, the kind of place with low lighting and comfortable seating, the kind of place where people came to celebrate endings.

"To the tour," Min-young said, raising her glass. "And to everyone who made it happen."

"To the tour." we echoed, and I felt the bittersweet weight of the moment settle into my chest.

I'd worked with these people for three months. Had shared meals and frustrations and the particular intimacy of creating something together. Had learned their rhythms, their preferences, the way they approached their craft. They'd become friends—real friends—and in a few hours, we would scatter back to our separate

lives.

"You're being maudlin," Min-young observed, settling into the seat beside me. "I can see it on your face."

"I'm being reflective."

"Same thing." She clinked her glass against mine. "It was a good tour. One of the best I've been on."

"Really?"

"Really. And you—" She smiled. "You exceeded every expectation. The management team is already asking about the next project."

"The next project?"

"The comeback. Next year. They want you again."

I stared at her, processing. Another tour. Another chance to do this—to travel, to photograph, to exist in this particular kind of chaos that I'd grown to love.

"I don't know if I can—"

"You don't have to decide now. But the offer is there. Think about it."

I would think about it. Would talk to William about it, weigh the possibilities against the realities of the life we were building together. But that was future-Est's problem. Tonight-Est just wanted to be present, to savor these final moments with the people who had shaped the last three months of his life.

"Thank you," I said. "For everything. For believing in me."

"You made it easy." She raised her glass again. "Now stop being sentimental and eat something. The food here is excellent."

The night stretched on, conversation flowing easily, laughter coming often. I found myself at the center of a group, telling stories about the tour—the disasters and triumphs, the moments no one else had witnessed. How I'd nearly dropped my camera into the crowd during the Osaka show. How I'd gotten lost in Taipei and ended up at a temple at sunrise, capturing some of my best work entirely by accident. How I'd learned to sleep on moving vehicles, eat standing up, and function on four hours of rest like it was normal. They listened. They laughed. They shared their own stories, weaving together a tapestry of the experience we'd shared.

And through it all, my phone buzzed with messages from home.

William: How's the party?



Est: Bittersweet. I'll miss these people.

William: But you're coming home tomorrow.

Est: I know. I can't wait.

William: I can't wait either. I have so much to show you.

Est: The house?

William: The house. The garden. Everything.

Est: And yourself?

William: Always.

I smiled at my phone, feeling the particular warmth that came from knowing someone was waiting for you, thinking about you, counting the hours until you returned.

Est: I love you.

William: I love you too. Now go enjoy your party. I'll be here when you're done.

I didn't sleep that night. Not because of the party—that ended around midnight, with hugs and promises to stay in touch and the particular melancholy of farewells. I returned to my hotel room, packed my bags for the final time, and then sat by the window, watching the Seoul skyline and thinking about everything that had happened.

Three months.

Ninety days of airports and hotels and unfamiliar beds. Ninety days of adjusting to new time zones, new languages, new ways of existing. Ninety days of capturing moments that would live forever in photographs, in memories, in the particular space that formed between experience and documentation.

I pulled out my laptop and scrolled through the archives—not the professional shots, but the personal ones. The photos I'd taken for myself, the moments no one had asked me to capture.

A street vendor in Tokyo, her hands moving with practiced grace as she assembled takoyaki.

A grandmother in Seoul, sitting on a bench in the park, feeding pigeons with the particular patience of someone who had nowhere else to be.

A child in Manila, laughing as he chased a stray cat through an alley, his joy so pure it hurt to look at.

A sunset in Singapore, the city's famous skyline silhouetted against colors I'd never seen before.

A street performer in Kuala Lumpur, his music so beautiful that I'd stopped to listen for an hour, my camera forgotten at my side.

These were mine. Not belonging to any management company, not destined for any photobook. Just evidence that I'd been here, that I'd seen this, that the world was full of beauty if you were willing to look.

I thought about what William had said—about showing my work properly. About exhibitions and galleries and the possibility of being more than just a tour photographer. Maybe. Someday. But for now, I was just a man sitting in a hotel room, watching the sunrise over a city that had become familiar, thinking about the home waiting for him on the other side of the world.

The group chat had been active all month.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: [Image] [Image] [Image]

Lego: Dance class today! Hong came to take pictures!

The photos showed Lego in a dance studio, his body caught mid-movement, his expression fierce and focused. His knee brace was gone entirely now—healed, finally, after months of careful recovery. He looked strong. Confident. Like someone who had come through difficulty and emerged better for it.

Hong: [Image] [Image]

Hong: He made me climb on a ladder. For the "angle."

The photos from Hong showed something different—Lego from above, the studio's mirrors creating infinite reflections, the particular geometry of a dancer in motion.

Est: These are incredible. Both of you.

Lego: P'Hong is a natural! I've been teaching him composition basics!

Hong: I'm being tutored by a child.

Lego: I'm TWENTY.

Hong: A child.

Tui: To be fair, you ARE taking his advice.

Hong: Because it's good advice. That doesn't make him not a child.

Lego: I'm going to remember this the next time you want cookies.

Hong: The cookies are unrelated to this discussion.

Est: I've missed you all so much.

William: We've missed you too. Come home soon.

The pictures of the house came throughout the final month, a visual diary of transformation.

William: [Image]

William: The garden today. Lego added the birdbath.

The photo showed the garden in late afternoon light—transformed from the overgrown chaos I remembered into something beautiful and intentional. Roses climbing the back fence. Hydrangeas blooming in shades of purple and blue. The frangipani tree, still standing, now surrounded by companions that complemented its delicate beauty.

And in the center, a small stone birdbath, already being investigated by sparrows.

Est: It's gorgeous.

William: Lego is very proud. He's been out here every day, monitoring "growth metrics."

Est: He would have growth metrics.

William: He has spreadsheets, Est. Actual spreadsheets tracking the progress of individual plants.

Est: Of course he does. He's Lego.

William: He's insane. But the garden is beautiful. So I can't complain.

William: [Image] [Image]

William: Upstairs bathroom. Almost completely renovated.

The photos showed a space I barely recognized. Where there had been water damage and decay, now there was clean tile and modern fixtures. The window had been replaced, letting in natural light that made the whole room glow. A small shelf held plants—Lego's influence again, probably—and the walls were painted a soft, calming blue.

Est: This is amazing, William. You did this.

William: I hired people who did this. I just wrote checks and made decisions.

Est: That's still doing something. That's still bringing this place back to life.

William: I suppose. Some of the original furniture couldn't be saved. The water damage was too extensive.

Est: That's okay. New furniture can be part of the new chapter.

William: That's what Lego said. He's been helping me pick things out. Nothing matching, of course. Everything has to have "character."

Est: I would expect nothing less.

William: The bookshelves are my favorite. I'll show you when you get home.

Est: I can't wait to see everything. In person.

William: Six more days.

Est: I'm counting.

William: [Image]

The photo was simple—William's face, soft with morning light, his hair still sleep-rumpled. Behind him, I could see the corner of his apartment, the same space I remembered from before I left. But something was different. Something in his expression, maybe. A lightness that hadn't been there three months ago. A presence.

William: Good morning. I just wanted you to see my face.

Est: I always want to see your face.

William: Even with bedhead?

Est: ESPECIALLY with bedhead. It's very endearing.

William: I don't know about endearing.

Est: Trust me. Endearing.

William: I miss you.

Est: I miss you too. Five more days.

William: I know. I'm counting too.

It happened on Day 83.

I was in my hotel room, packing for the final time, when my phone buzzed with a video call request. William.

"Hey," I said, answering. "I was just thinking about you."

"You're always thinking about me. I'm very memorable."

"And humble."

"The most humble." He smiled, but there was something different in his expression tonight. Nervous, maybe. Anticipatory.

"What's going on?" I asked, settling onto the bed. "You have a face."

"I have a face?"

"You know what I mean. You're thinking about something."

He was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. When he spoke, his voice was careful, deliberate.

"I've been thinking about us," he said. "About what happens when you come home."

"What do you mean?"

"We've been—whatever we've been—for months now. Talking every night. Sharing everything. Building something, even from opposite sides of the world." He took a breath. "And I was wondering—when you get back—would it be okay for us to make it official?"

My heart stopped.

"Official?"

"Boyfriends. Properly. Publicly. Not just—whatever undefined thing we've been." He looked at me through the screen, his expression vulnerable in a way that made my chest ache. "I want to introduce you to people as my boyfriend. I want everyone to know you're mine, and I'm yours. I want—"

"Yes."

He stopped mid-sentence. "Yes?"

"Yes. Absolutely yes. Without question yes." I was laughing now, tears pricking at my eyes. "William, I've been waiting for you to ask since before I left."

"You have?"

"Of course I have. I love you. I've loved you for months. Making it official is just—it's just words. But I want those words. I want everyone to know."

His smile was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Brighter than any sunset I'd photographed, warmer than any light I'd captured on film.

"So when you get home—"

"When I get home, you're my boyfriend. Officially. Completely. Forever, if you'll have me."

"Forever sounds about right."

I wiped my eyes, laughing at myself, at the particular absurdity of crying from happiness while video calling someone from a hotel room in Seoul.

"I can't believe you made me wait until Day 83 to ask."

"I was waiting for the right moment."

"The right moment was Day 1."

"I was scared on Day 1."

"Fair." I smiled at him through the screen. "I was scared too. I'm still scared, honestly. But I'm also—I'm also so happy, William. So incredibly happy."

"Me too." His voice was soft. "Come home soon. I have so much to tell you in person."

"Four more days."

"Four more days. And then forever."

The news about Hong and Nut came the next day.

CHAOS SQUAD

Nut: So, um. I have an announcement.

Lego: OMG OMG OMG

Lego: IS IT WHAT I THINK IT IS

Nut: It depends on what you think it is.

Lego: HONG AND NUT SITTING IN A TREE

Hong: We're not in a tree. We're in a restaurant. Having dinner.

Tui: He asked you.

Hong: He asked me.

Lego: AND YOU SAID YES???

Hong: I said yes.

Lego: [Image]

The image was just a screenshot of Lego's phone screen, showing approximately seventeen crying face emojis in a row.

Est: I'm so happy for you both!!!

Nut: Thanks. It only took me six months of subtle hints.

Hong: They were not subtle. You literally asked me to dinner and said "like a date, but for real this time."

Nut: That's subtle!

Hong: In what universe is that subtle?

Nut: The universe where you kept pretending not to notice my other hints!

Hong: I noticed. I was playing hard to get.

Tui: Hong, you've never played hard to get in your life.

Hong: I was cultivating mystery.

Lego: You were being oblivious.

Hong: I was NOT oblivious. I was deliberate.

Est: Regardless of how it happened, I'm thrilled. Welcome to the couples club, Hong.

Hong: The couples club sounds insufferable.

Nut: Too late. You're in it now.

William: Congratulations, both of you. Hong, I look forward to teasing you relentlessly about this when Est gets home.

Hong: I will destroy you.

William: Looking forward to it.

The photos that came after that were different.

Still Hong photographing Lego's dance classes. Still Lego taking candid shots of Hong in the studio. But now there were new additions—Nut appearing in Hong's photos, his hand visible at the edge of a frame, his presence implied even when he wasn't the subject.

Hong: [Image]

The photo showed Hong at a shopping center, trying on sunglasses with an expression of intense skepticism. In the reflection of the mirror, I could see Nut behind him, phone raised, grinning.

Est: You look very mysterious.

Hong: I look like a bug.

Est: A very fashionable bug.

Hong: Stop.

Nut: He bought them. He's wearing them right now.

Hong: BETRAYAL.

Lego: [Image] [Image]

The photos were from what appeared to be a double date—Tui and Lego on one side of a restaurant table, Nut and Hong on the other. Tui had his arm around Lego's shoulders, casual and possessive. Nut was leaning into Hong's space, their shoulders touching.

Lego: DOUBLE DATE NIGHT!!!

Lego: P'Hong almost smiled!!!

Hong: I did not almost smile.

Tui: You definitely almost smiled.

Hong: I was grimacing. It's a different expression.

Nut: It was a smile. I have evidence.

Nut: [Image]



The photo showed Hong mid-laugh, his usually serious face transformed by genuine amusement. Nut was beside him, watching him laugh with an expression that could only be described as besotted.

Est: This is the best thing I've seen all week.

Hong: Delete it.

Est: Never. This is my new screensaver.

Hong: I will remember this.

Lego: You can't be mad! You're in LOVE!!!

Hong: I am not in love. I am in a contractual arrangement of mutual benefit.

Nut: He calls it love when we're alone.

Hong: I WILL DESTROY ALL OF YOU.

The call came on Day 85. I was in my hotel room, sorting through the final batch of photos, when my phone rang. William.

"Hey, I was just about to call you."

"I have news," William said, and there was something in his voice—excitement, barely contained. "My manager wants to talk to you."

"Your manager?"

"About your photos. The tour work. She's seen some of the images you've posted, and she's—" He paused. "She's interested in showing them. Properly."

"Showing them how?"

"A gallery exhibition. Your work. Your vision. Not just tour documentation, but art."

I sat down heavily on the bed, my legs suddenly unreliable.

"William, I'm not—I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"You're ready. You've been ready for years. You just didn't know it."

"But an actual exhibition? That's—that's your world. That's paintings and serious art and critics who know things."

"Photography is serious art. Your photography is serious art." His voice softened.

"Est, I've watched you grow over these three months. I've seen your work evolve

from excellent to extraordinary. You have something to say, and people should hear it."

"I don't even know what I'm trying to say."

"That's okay. Art doesn't always require words. Sometimes it just requires presence. And your photos are present in a way that demands attention."

I stared at the wall, trying to process. An exhibition. A real exhibition. My work on gallery walls, my vision offered up for judgment.

"I'm scared." I admitted.

"I know. I was scared too. Before 'Absence & Light.' Before everything." I could hear him breathing, steady and present. "But you taught me something, Est. You taught me that being scared doesn't mean you're not ready. It just means it matters."

"When did I teach you that?"

"Every time you showed up to photograph me, even when things were complicated between us. Every time you chose to be present instead of running away. Every time you looked at me through your camera and saw something worth capturing."

Tears were building in my eyes. I blinked them back.

"Okay." I said.

"Okay?"

"Okay, I'll talk to your manager. I'll think about the exhibition. I'll—" I took a shaky breath. "I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking."

The morning of Day 90 arrived with a particular kind of light. I woke early, earlier than necessary, and spent the final hours in my hotel room doing all the small rituals of departure. Packing the last items. Checking the drawers one more time. Standing at the window, watching Seoul wake up for the final time.

Three months ago, I'd arrived here not knowing what to expect. Hoping, maybe, but not knowing. And now I was leaving with more than I'd imagined possible—professional recognition, personal growth, the quiet confidence of someone who had done something difficult and done it well. But more than all of that, I was leaving with William. Not physically—not yet. But in the only way that had ever really mattered. In my heart, in my phone, in the thousands of messages we'd exchanged over ninety days of distance.

Est: I'm leaving for the airport in an hour.

William: I know. I've been awake since 4 AM.

Est: You couldn't sleep?

William: I'm too excited. And nervous. And excited.

Est: Nervous about what?

William: Seeing you. In person. After all this time.

Est: It's still me. Same person you've been talking to every night.

William: I know. But it's different. Real and present and—I can actually touch you. That's terrifying.

Est: In a good way?

William: In the best way.

Est: I'll see you in about fourteen hours.

William: I'll be waiting. I have a surprise.

Est: What kind of surprise?

William: The kind I can't tell you about because it would ruin the surprise.

Est: That's deeply unhelpful.

William: I know. I'm enjoying this.

Est: I love you.

William: I love you too. Come home safe.

The flight was interminable, hours of suspension between worlds—not quite in Korea anymore, not yet in Thailand. I spent the time editing photos, reviewing the tour archives, trying to distract myself from the particular anxiety of anticipation. But every few minutes, my thoughts would drift back to William. To what was waiting for me on the other side of this journey.

A boyfriend. An official relationship. A future that was finally taking shape.

I thought about the other couples too—Tui and Lego, solid and established now, their relationship having deepened during my absence. Hong and Nut, new and uncertain but clearly devoted to each other. All of us building something, choosing

something, becoming something.

The world below was invisible through the clouds, but I knew it was there. Waiting.

Home was waiting.

Suvarnabhumi Airport looked exactly the same as when I'd left. The same crowds, the same fluorescent lighting, the same particular chaos of an international hub. I moved through immigration on autopilot, my body remembering the movements even as my mind raced ahead to what was waiting. Baggage claim was a special kind of torture—watching the carousel turn, willing my suitcases to appear, bouncing on my heels with impatience. When my bags finally emerged, I grabbed them without finesse and made for the exit. The arrivals hall was crowded. Drivers holding signs, families waiting for loved ones, the particular mix of reunion and anticipation that defined this space.

And then I saw him.

William.

He was standing near the far wall, away from the main crowd, holding a bouquet of flowers—white roses mixed with something purple I couldn't identify. He was wearing something I'd never seen before—a soft blue sweater that made his eyes stand out, clothes that looked like he'd actually thought about them. And he was smiling. That particular smile, the one I'd memorized through a thousand video calls, now here, now real, now present.

"William!"

I didn't mean to shout. Didn't mean to abandon my luggage cart and run across the arrivals hall like something out of a romantic comedy. But I did both of those things, and by the time I realized what I was doing, I was in his arms. He caught me—actually caught me, like I weighed nothing, like he'd been waiting to hold me for ninety days and wasn't about to let the opportunity slip away.

"Hi." he said into my hair.

"Hi."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

I pulled back just enough to look at his face, to confirm that this was real, that I wasn't still dreaming on the plane.

"I got my driver's license." he said.

"What?"

"My driver's license. I passed the test last week. I drove here myself."

I stared at him. "You drove. To the airport. By yourself."

"Well, I practiced a lot. Tui took me to the testing center. Lego was in the car for the practice sessions, which was—" He shuddered slightly. "—an experience."

"William." I was crying now, I realized. Tears streaming down my face in the middle of the airport arrivals hall. "You drove here."

"I wanted to pick you up properly. Not in a taxi, not with a driver. Just—me. Coming to get you."

"I love you." The words felt inadequate for everything I was feeling. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." He kissed me then—soft and certain, the kind of kiss that said you're mine and I'm yours and nothing is ever going to change that.

When we separated, I noticed the other passengers giving us a wide berth, probably annoyed by the emotional display blocking their path.

"I should get my luggage," I said. "Before someone steals it."

"Probably a good idea."

We retrieved my abandoned cart, and William's eyebrows rose when he saw the collection.

"I don't remember there being so many bags."

"I may have acquired some additional luggage."

"Additional how?"

"Well, there were gifts. A lot of gifts. And souvenirs. And some equipment I couldn't pass up. And—"

"Est."

"It's fine. I checked them all. I paid the fees."

"How many bags is this?"

"Five. But one of them is just gifts!"

William looked at the pile of luggage, then back at me, his expression a mixture of exasperation and affection.

"I love you," he said. "Even though you apparently became a shopaholic while you were gone."

"I bought things for everyone! I was being thoughtful!"

"Five bags thoughtful?"

"Quality requires quantity."

He laughed—that sound I'd missed so much, heard through phone speakers but never quite the same as hearing it in person.

"Come on," he said, grabbing the cart. "Let's get you home."

The drive through Bangkok was strange and wonderful. Strange because William was driving—actually driving, navigating traffic with a carefulness that spoke to how new this still was for him. Wonderful because I was here, in the passenger seat, watching the city I'd missed for three months flow past the windows.

"How does it feel?" William asked, glancing at me. "Being back?"

"Surreal. Good. Like I've been holding my breath for ninety days and I can finally exhale."

"The apartment's not far. I made sure everything was ready."

"Ready how?"

"Just—clean. Fresh sheets. The plants watered." He paused. "Your plants survived, by the way. I only almost killed the fern once."

"Almost?"

"Lego intervened. He has strong opinions about fern care."

I smiled, watching the familiar streets pass by. "I can't wait to see everyone."

"About that—"

His tone made me look at him more closely. "What about that?"

"Nothing bad. Just—don't be surprised when we get to your apartment. That's all I'm saying."

"William, what did you do?"

"Nothing! I did nothing. I'm innocent."

"You're making a face."

"I'm making a driving face. I'm concentrating on the road."

"You're making a suspicious face."

"The road is very suspicious today."

I laughed despite myself, letting the mystery remain. Whatever was waiting, I would find out soon enough.

My apartment building looked exactly as I'd left it. The familiar courtyard, the worn steps, the particular pattern of cracks in the concrete that I'd memorized over years of living here. But as William led me up the stairs, his hand warm in mine, I could feel something different in the air. An energy. An anticipation.

"William—"

"Just trust me."

He unlocked the door—when had I given him my spare key?—and pushed it open.

"WELCOME HOME!"

The noise hit me first—voices overlapping, cheering, the particular cacophony of people who were very excited to see me. Then the visuals registered: decorations everywhere, streamers and balloons, a banner hung across the living room that said "WELCOME BACK EST" in what was definitely Lego's handwriting.

And the people.

Tui, standing near the back, a beer already in hand, a new tattoo visible on his forearm—something floral, intricate, probably Hong's work. His hair was slightly longer than when I'd left, his whole energy more relaxed.

Nut, looking almost professional despite the party atmosphere, his hair noticeably longer, tied back in a small ponytail that made him look like an entirely different person. He was standing close to Hong, their shoulders touching.

Hong, whose silver hair was now a deep charcoal gray, almost black, the dramatic change making his features look sharper, more intense. He was scowling at the decorations but unable to hide the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

And Lego—

Lego, who threw himself at me before I could even process his appearance. Lego, whose hair was now SHORT—dramatically short—and PINK. Bright, vibrant, utterly Lego pink.

"P'EST!" He was hugging me so hard I couldn't breathe. "You're HOME!"

"Lego—your hair—"

"Do you like it? P'Tui said it was too much but I said it was exactly enough and Hong did the color himself and—"

"It's perfect." I hugged him back, feeling the particular warmth of being surrounded by people who loved you. "Everything is perfect."

The next few hours were a blur of food and laughter and stories. They'd prepared everything. Thai food—the real thing, the dishes I'd been craving for months. Tom yum soup that made my eyes water in the best way. Pad thai with exactly the right amount of tamarind. Massaman curry that tasted like home.

"I missed this," I said, through a mouthful of som tam. "The spice. The herbs. Nothing tastes the same abroad."

"We know," Tui said dryly. "You texted us about it approximately every day."

"I was emotionally fragile."

"You were dramatic."

"Those are the same thing."

Lego had made cake—a towering creation covered in what appeared to be every type of candy available in Bangkok. The decorations said "Welcome Home" in approximately seventeen different colors.

"It's a lot," Lego admitted. "But I couldn't decide on a theme."

"The theme is chaos," Hong said. "Very on brand."

"The theme is LOVE."

"Still chaos."

The drinks flowed freely—beer and wine and something sweet that Lego had concocted that tasted like liquid candy. I caught up on three months of news, hearing about Tui's new clients and Hong's emerging fashion line and Nut's increasingly complicated work schedule.

"Show him the tattoo," Lego insisted, tugging at Tui's sleeve. "The new one!"

Tui rolled up his sleeve to reveal the fresh ink—a beautiful floral piece covering his forearm, intricate and detailed, clearly Hong's work.

"Lego designed it," Tui said. "Hong executed it."

"It's gorgeous." I reached out to look more closely. "The detail work is incredible."



"Hong's getting better," Tui admitted. "Though I'll deny saying that if anyone asks."

"I have witnesses." Hong said.

"They can be silenced."

"P'Tui, that's concerning."

The banter was familiar, comfortable, the particular rhythm of people who had known each other long enough to tease without mercy.

"Your turn," Lego said, turning to me. "Show us your favorites. From the tour."

I pulled out my phone, scrolling through the archives I'd curated over three months. Photos from every country, every venue, every moment that had mattered.

They gathered around, exclaiming over images, asking questions about contexts, demanding stories behind each shot. I told them everything—the concerts, the cities, the people I'd met. The ways I'd grown, the fears I'd conquered, the dreams I'd finally made real.

"This one's my favorite." I said, showing them the shot from Manila. The moment of connection between performer and fan, raw and genuine.

"It's beautiful." Lego said softly.

"It's art." Hong agreed—the highest compliment he could give.

"It's why we're doing the exhibition," William said from beside me. "When he's ready."

"Exhibition?" Tui raised an eyebrow. "What exhibition?"

"William's manager wants to show my work. Properly. In a gallery."

The room erupted in congratulations, in plans already forming, in the particular energy of people who loved you celebrating your success. I looked around at all of them—my people, my family, the ones who had waited for me to come home. This was what I'd been missing. Not just Thailand, not just the food, but this. This particular configuration of people who knew me and loved me and wanted me to succeed.

I was home.

Really, truly home.

The party wound down gradually, naturally. Nut was the first to leave—work in the

morning, he explained, though the way Hong's hand lingered on his as they said goodbye suggested other reasons too.

"We'll see you this weekend?" Nut asked. "Dinner at the studio. Hong's cooking."

"Hong's cooking?" I raised an eyebrow. "Since when does Hong cook?"

"Since Nut taught him," Hong said. "And before you say anything—I'm adequate. That's the best I can offer."

"Adequate Hong cooking sounds perfect."

Tui and Lego left next, wrapped around each other like they couldn't bear to be separate even for the walk to the car. Lego hugged me three more times on the way out, extracting promises to see him tomorrow, the next day, every day for at least a week.

"I need to catch up on THREE MONTHS of you," he insisted. "That's going to take time."

"We have time. I'm not going anywhere."

"Not for a while, anyway." His expression shifted, something more serious underneath the brightness. "But if the tour wants you again—"

"I'll think about it. We'll talk about it. Nothing's decided."

"Okay." He hugged me one more time. "I'm so glad you're home."

"Me too, Lego. Me too."

Hong was the last to leave, pausing at the door with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"You did good," he said finally. "The tour. The photos. All of it."

"Thank you."

"I still think your color grading is sometimes too warm, but—"

"Hong."

"—overall, the work is excellent."

I laughed, pulling him into a hug he pretended not to want but leaned into anyway.

"I missed you too, Hong."

"I didn't say I missed you."

"You didn't have to."

He grumbled something unintelligible and left, his dark gray hair catching the hallway light.

And then it was just William and me.

The apartment was quiet in the aftermath of the party. Decorations still hung from every surface. Dishes were piled in the sink, evidence of the celebration. My suitcases remained unpacked by the door, the gifts inside still waiting to be distributed. But none of that mattered.

What mattered was William, standing in my living room, looking at me with an expression that made my heart do complicated things.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi."

"They're gone."

"They're gone."

"It's just us."

"Just us."

I crossed the room to him, my body knowing what it wanted even if my words hadn't caught up. He met me halfway, and then we were kissing—properly, thoroughly, the kind of kiss we hadn't been able to have in the crowded airport, in the car, surrounded by friends.

"I missed you." I said against his lips.

"I missed you too. More than I knew how to say."

"You said it anyway. Every night."

"Words felt inadequate."

"They felt perfect."

We kissed again, and again, making up for three months of distance, of screens, of the particular torture of wanting someone you couldn't touch.

"Stay tonight?" I asked, when we finally came up for air.

"I wasn't planning on leaving."

"Good."

"Good."

The bedroom was exactly as I'd left it, except for the fresh sheets William had mentioned and a small vase of flowers on the nightstand—more white roses, like the ones he'd brought to the airport.

"You really did prepare everything." I said.

"I wanted it to be perfect. Your homecoming."

"It's already perfect. You're here."

He kissed me again, and I let myself fall into the particular surrender of being home, being safe, being exactly where I was meant to be.

The night unfolded slowly, gently—reconnection after separation, familiar and new all at once. We took our time, learning each other again, discovering what three months of longing had made possible.

"I love you," he said, afterward, when we were tangled together in my too-small bed. "I love you so much it terrifies me."

"Good terror or bad terror?"

"The best kind. The kind that means something matters."

I traced patterns on his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath my fingertips. "I love you too. Every day I was gone, I loved you more."

"Even when I was annoying about the plants?"

"Especially then."

He laughed, pulling me closer.

"I have something for you," he said. "I was going to wait until tomorrow, but—I can't wait anymore."

He reached for his jacket, discarded on the floor, and pulled out a small box. Inside were two bracelets—simple silver bands with a subtle pattern etched into the surface.

"Matching," I realized.

"Matching. So when we're apart—which will probably happen again—we can look at these and remember we're connected."

I felt tears building in my eyes. "William—"

"And I have a question." His voice was steady, but I could see the nervousness in his eyes. "Est, will you be my boyfriend? Officially, completely, for everyone to know?"

"You already asked me that. On video call."

"I'm asking again. In person. So there's no doubt."

I looked at the bracelets, at his face, at the man I'd loved from a distance for three months and up close for longer than that.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, yes, yes."

I kissed him—hard, certain, full of everything I felt.

"Yes forever?" he asked, when we separated.

"Yes forever."

He slipped the bracelet onto my wrist, and I slipped the other onto his. Matching. Connected. Bound together by silver and intention and the particular kind of love that survived distance.

"I love you," I said again.

"I love you too." He pulled me close, and I settled against him, feeling the particular rightness of being exactly where I belonged. "Welcome home, Est."

"It's good to be home."

I woke to Bangkok sunlight streaming through my window. William was still asleep beside me, his face peaceful, his breathing slow and even. The silver bracelet caught the light, matching the one on my own wrist. Outside, the city was waking up—the particular sounds of home, so different from Seoul or Tokyo or any of the places I'd been. Motorcycles and street vendors and the distant hum of traffic.

I lay there for a while, just existing. Processing everything that had happened—the tour, the homecoming, the particular joy of being exactly where I was meant to be. There would be challenges ahead. The exhibition to plan. The possibility of another tour. The ongoing work of building a life with someone, of choosing each other every day. But right now, in this moment, everything was perfect.

I reached for my phone, scrolling through the messages that had accumulated overnight.

CHAOS SQUAD

Lego: Good morning!!! Hope you slept well!!!

Hong: Lego, it's 6 AM.

Lego: The early bird catches the worm!!!

Hong: What worm? What are you catching?

Lego: Joy, P'Hong. I'm catching JOY.

Tui: Both of you go back to sleep.

Nut: Too late. I'm awake now.

Nut: Morning, Est. Welcome home again.

I typed a response, careful not to wake William.

Est: Morning, everyone. I'm home. Really, truly home.

Hong: We know. We were there.

Est: I know. I just wanted to say it.

Est: I'm home. And I'm exactly where I want to be.

William: (typing...)

I looked over to see William awake, phone in hand, a sleepy smile on his face.

William: Me too.

I set down my phone and kissed him—soft, morning-gentle, full of promise.

"Good morning, boyfriend," I said.

"Good morning, boyfriend."

"What do we do now?"

"Now?" He pulled me closer, and I let myself be pulled. "Now we live. Together. One day at a time."

"That sounds perfect."

"It will be." He kissed me again. "It already is."

Outside, Bangkok continued its eternal motion. Inside, we stayed still—connected, content, complete. The tour had given me the world. But coming home had given me everything.